

# Return to the homelands

ROSL bursary recipients are coming back to Namibian communities with new skills. **Margaret Adrian-Vallance** travels to the Nyae Nyae to report on their progress



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In the heat of the Nyae Nyae Conservancy (well over the usual 40°C last October), paper takes on a new consistency – tearing up draft notes is like ripping crisps. Skin cream melts, biro's drip. But a strange thing happens: the area is so fascinating one hardly notices the heat.

The 9,000 sq km conservancy, registered with the Namibian government in May 1997, is home to the Ju/'hoansi who have lived here for

40,000 years. Considered the most traditional of all Bushman groups due to their isolation until 1951, they are still allowed to hunt in the traditional way.

Nowadays most Ju/'hoansi wear western clothes; the person in traditional leather who teaches tracking one day will be in jeans and T-shirt the next. Pastor Hendrik van Zyl, who lives in Tsumkwe, used to exchange food for

traditional clothes; now the Ju/'hoansi need them back – the growing number of tourists want tradition not trend. This desire for 'the authentic' may even help the Bushman culture survive.

Tsumkwe is the largest village near the Nyae Nyae. It has one shop, with meat hanging outside under a tree, and no petrol station (for safety reasons; it's too hot). However, the Chinese are investing here, as in the rest of Namibia. They have funded an attractive craft centre and are building new classrooms at Tsumkwe Secondary School.

Helping to combine tradition with modern life (which has arrived in a relative blink of an eye in Ju/'hoansi terms) are former ROSL bursary recipients Cwisa Cwi and his sister Katrina. Cwisa is now principal of the Nyae Nyae village schools, set up in 1995. Katrina is a broadcaster and administrator at NBC Radio Tsumkwe, where manager Patrick Zudan speaks warmly of her competence. Katrina now efficiently juggles news reading, music editing and administrative tasks, and says that being a ROSL bursary recipient greatly helped to give her confidence.

So how does Cwisa find his new role? He says he is happy to be back in his homeland and feels very grateful to the League. "I wouldn't be here if it was not for their help." His main concerns are the high drop-out rate in the village schools and the difficulty of finding teachers who speak Ju/'hoansi. In his office, copies of the



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**BUSH LIFE:** Principal Cwisa Cwi (above, far right) with pupils and teachers, pointing out the tree brought down by elephants in the night. Dom lights a fire in the traditional way (top)

new school reader *Life in the Nyae Nyae* have just arrived. In both Ju/'hoansi and English, these well-illustrated histories feature contributions by local people, including Cwisa.

Around 3,000 Ju/'hoansi live in the conservancy, formerly known as Eastern Bushmanland, and each of the 36 villages now has a bore hole and tap. In the dry season this can bring elephant-human conflict. "We had to hide under the desks during the night," say teachers Magdalena Sorvas and Batseba Gamses when we arrived at Denlui School. "We could hear the elephants rubbing against the walls and windows. We thought they'd come in."

Getting to schools and villages requires skilful driving over sunken sand tracks. These are also used by elephants, so it pays to know their droppings (how recent are they? Is the herd ten minutes away or ten miles?).

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A rapid learning curve is essential, so Kaeqce Gery, a guide in the Nyae Nyae, and Kxoara Kosta, who is a guide and former Tsumkwe School pupil, give a brief introduction to droppings, tracking and bush food. We roam around a deserted pan area finding medicinal gum, tasting salt circles and munching water root.

Nllao Mapepe, who has a watch tattooed on his wrist, carefully removes a piece of violet tree root, which is good for muscle pain. It smells wonderful, just like Vicks Vapour Rub. To this day, it lingers on my notebooks so that back in the UK I still have my own little bit of the wonderful Nyae Nyae.



**SIDE BY SIDE:** Kxoara Kosta and Kaeqce Gery search for the water root (above). Broadcaster Katrina Cwi in NBC Radio Tsumkwe's recording studio (left). Her brother Cqui is a ROSL bursary recipient at Grootfontein Secondary School